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ABSTRACT

This study of children in a Malay community assesses the cross-cultural validity of one conceptualization of temperament, identifies cultural differences in child rearing practices and beliefs, and explores parents' recognition of individual differences emerging in early childhood. The community studied consisted of three villages located about 20 miles from Kuala Lumpur. Forty child profiles were obtained through interviews with 32 families. The questionnaire for profiles of children less than two years old was based on Carey's temperament questionnaire, developed from studies by Thomas and Chess. The Thomas and Chess Parent and Teacher Questionnaire was used for the profiles of the older children. Results revealed that some of the components of temperament showed similar distributions to those reported for American samples in previous studies while other components showed striking differences between the samples. In the Malay sample, 62.5 percent of the children were classified as easy temperament types, 7.5 percent as difficult, 7.5 percent as slow to warm up and 22.5 percent as mixed types. Malay parents reported sensory thresholds as being low for 72.5 percent of the children studied. Distractability scores were high. Approach and adaptability scores seemed comparable to those in the American groups. Regularity scores were somewhat affected by the practice of feeding children when they were hungry. In conclusion, some of the cultural differences in childrearing that affect the interpretation of a temperament questionnaire are discussed. (Author/RH)

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MALAY CHILDHOOD, TEMPERAMENT AND INDIVIDUALITY*

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Children are different from one another in activity level, quickness of adaptation to new experiences, sensitivity to different kinds of stimuli, and other basic response styles. Such differences have come to be known as temperament. There is not yet agreement as to the individual differences that should be considered components of temperament, or the best means of measuring them, or whether some components of temperament are more enduring than others.

In making judgements about individual differences I suggest that our observations are filtered through several screens, including our own history as researchers, past observational or clinical experience, and our expectations as members of cultural groups of what behavior patterns are normal or typical of children and what patterns are unusual. Assessments of temperament are influenced by cultural expectations. For example, we may expect that certain events in childhood bring out different reactions from different children and are thus target episodes for assessing temperament, while we assume that other events are routine and experienced in the same way by most or all children and are thus not good sources of information on individual variation.

The present study of children in a Malay community explores the cross-cultural validity of one conceptualization of temperament, and considers the relationship between cultural differences in child rearing practices and beliefs, and parents' recognition of individual differences emerging in early childhood.

Thomas and Chess (1977, Thomas, Chess, Birch, Hertzig & Korn, 196?) have developed a model of temperament based on a series of longitudinal studies, beginning in the 1950's with the New York Longitudinal Study. Using parent interviews designed to elicit specific behavioral descriptions of recent events,

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*This is a slightly modified version of a paper presented at the 1981 SRCD meeting in Boston. References and tables have been added.

they identified nine components of temperament: activity level, approach-withdrawal, adaptability, mood, persistence, distractability, intensity, sensory thresholds, and rhymicity-regularity. In this conceptualization, temperament is identified with the individual's response style at a given time; individuals may change in interaction with their environments without invalidating a measure taken previously. For example, in a patient and accepting environment a child initially slow to adapt to new experiences may become better able to adapt. In addition, the Thomas and Chess view of temperament is not committed to demonstrating the source or cause of variations among individuals. The New York Longitudinal Study and related studies of varied cultural groups in New York City and of handicapped children, have discovered significant consistencies from one year to the next in children's tempermental descriptions, and some consistencies over periods of several years, particularly in the areas of activity level and adaptability. Thomas and Chess and their associates have also found three clusters of temperamental traits that are relatively enduring and predictive of children's overall adjustment, particularly the likelihood that they will develop behavior disorders. The Easy group, comprising 40% of their study group, are characterized by regularity, positive approach to new stimuli, high adaptability, mild or moderately intense reactions and primarily positive mood. The Difficult cluster, about 10%, includes children with irregular biological functions, negative responses to new stimuli, slow adaptation and intense and frequently negative moods. A slow to warm up cluster, about 15%, was marked by negative responses of mild intensity to new situations, followed by gradual adaptation, and low activity level. The remaining 35% did not fit into one type. Children of the Difficult type were found more likely to experience behavior problems throughout childhood, although those whose parents recognized and adjusted to their needs often developed without serious problems.

Studies relating cultural variations in childhood experience to individual differences in temperament or personality have been limited. Culture and

personality studies have been more likely to seek the one most typical personality type in a culture than to explore how cultures define and deal with individual variations. Mead's Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935) is an early exception, describing how three New Guinea cultures with different sex role patterns deal with individuals whose personalities are in conflict with sex-role expectations. Anthropological studies of deviance are not uncommon, but the full range of individual variations is less often addressed.

There are a few studies of cultural variation within the Thomas and Chess and similar frameworks of temperament research. Their predominantly middle-class Jewish NYLS sample and their Puerto Rican Working Class sample showed similar distributions of temperamental characteristics, but in the first sample, parents were more likely to exert pressure toward early independence and cognitive mastery and to notice and report problems at earlier ages, while the second group were tolerant of wider variations in early development but reported more behavioral problems when their children were faced with adapting to formal schooling at age six. Graham, Rutter and George (1973) in Britain, using a slightly different set of measures, found similar clusters and similar predictability of psychological disorder among children identified as Difficult. Other than an unpublished study in three East African societies cited by Thomas and Chess (1977), I could not locate any research on temperament in non-Western cultures.

The present study was carried out by the author and David J. Banks in 1978-79 in Malaysia. The Community we studied was a cluster of three villages located near the junction of a busy highway and a paved secondary road about 20 miles from the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. Most of the employed people in the area commute to Kuala Lumpur and its industrial suburbs by bus or motorcycle. The area has grown in population in recent years as people have moved to the urban area to seek employment, but it still has a rural appearance. In contrast to a

rice-growing region about twenty miles farther from the city, this area was not heavily agricultural before the population increase, although it is surrounded by plantations growing crops of rubber and palm oil, and a few of our informants owned small rubber tree holdings. The Malays are a cultural group forming a slight majority of the Malaysian population, which also has large Chinese and Indian minorities. Malays are Muslims and have traditionally held agricultural livelihoods but are increasingly entering the modern economy. Many of the inhabitants of our study area moved there from other parts of the Malay peninsula or were descendants of Indonesian immigrants from Sumatra and Java, culturally closely related to Malays.

Occupations of the fathers in our study group included factory worker, security guard, police officer, driver, restaurant cook, and clerical worker. Three mothers were employed as clerical workers in the city; we interviewed the grandparents who were the daytime caregivers for their children. Several other mothers had been employed before having children as clerical or factory workers or household helpers. Most children in the community leave school in their early teens although a few have attended teachers' colleges and universities. The literacy rate is high, with most of the mothers reporting four to six years of education. We did not collect family income data but the economic level of the families ranged from poverty, households with few amenities and low protein diets, to moderate affluence by local standards, households with television sets, refrigerators and modern furniture. Nearly all the households had electricity and access to piped water. The dietary staple is rice, supplemented by fish and vegetables. About half the infants are breast fed and the rest were fed with powdered formula. Free medical care was available, and most of the children had had the recommended immunizations. According to the medical personnel we interviewed, serious illnesses such as malaria and tuberculosis were now rare. The families we interviewed had between one and thirteen children; acceptance of family planning is widespread and young parents often plan to have two or three children.

Our main informants were 28 mothers, 2 grandmothers, one grandfather and one father; frequently more than one parent or grandparent participated in the interview. In eight of the 32 families we conducted interviews about two children, for a total of 40 child profiles. Twenty two of the children were between 6 months and 2 years of age, one was 3 1/2 months old, and 17 were between 2 and 6 years. We estimate that we interviewed about half the households with children under 6 years of age in the community.

Our questionnaire was based on Carey's temperament questionnaire, (Carey, 1973) which grew out of the Thomas and Chess studies, for the children less than two years old, and the Thomas and Chess Parent and Teacher Questionnaire, (Thomas and Chess, 1977) for the older group. The questionnaires were translated into the Malay language with modifications as needed for variations in childhood experience. As in the original research, I attempted to concentrate on recent events and to ask for specific behavioral descriptions. I also asked parents to describe the children's personalities and to discuss differences among the children in their families.

RESULTS

The distribution of temperamental clusters in our study group is somewhat similar to that reported by Thomas and Chess, with 62.5% of the children classified as Easy temperament types, 7.5% as Difficult, 7.5% as Slow to Warm Up and 22.5% as mixed types. (Table I). Some adjustments were made in the criteria for these classifications to account for apparent differences in the two cultures with regard to perceiving a behavioral tendency as difficult or easy.

Among the components of temperament, some showed similar distributions to those reported for the American samples, while some striking differences appeared. (Tables 2 and 3). Malay parents reported Thresholds as low for 72.5% of children. Typically, they expect children to be sensitive to sounds, lights and odors and to be highly intolerant of wet or uncomfortable clothing.

In this study, children were classified as temperamentally Easy in spite of low threshold scores, if the other components were in the Easy directions, because low thresholds so conform to parents' expectations that this trait would not make a child seem difficult to a Malay parent. Distractability scores were also high, 62.5% overall and 74% for the children under two years. This measure is accounted for by parents' reports that their children are easily soothed when upset. Parents rarely stated a distinction between attempts to soothe an infant and the results. They assumed that holding and talking softly would work. Distractability with playthings was less easy to assess, along with persistence, because the children had fewer playthings than American infants, though most households had some toys. Parents were very likely to say that a child plays with a toy only a "moment" but the Malay word for "moment" is even more ambiguous than the English word. Infants were described as not understanding toys yet. There were exceptions, with some children reported as persistent in achieving goals and in activities such as looking at pictures. Approach and Adaptability scores seem comparable to those in the American groups. For some of the children, the number of new experiences encountered was perhaps less than the number of new experiences encountered by an American child. Many modifications of the questionnaires were necessary on these points. Regularity scores were somewhat affected by the practice of feeding children when they are hungry, rather than having set mealtimes for them, even though adults eat at specific times. Families varied in this practice, but when a child's mealtimes were irregular, it would probably have less meaning for the child's biological processes than it would in a culture in which children are expected to eat at set intervals.

I will conclude by discussing some of the cultural differences in childrearing that affect the interpretation of a temperament questionnaire. Malay parents say that a child's likes and dislikes should not be challenged

unnecessarily. The idea that a parent would try repeatedly to get a child to accept a new food or to try a new experience strikes them as odd. A child's rejection of something is described succinctly: "He/she did not want it." An item in the Carey questionnaire asks how a baby reacts when he has had enough to eat but you try to give him a little more. Our informants thought this item bizarre; no one would try to do this, the baby knows when he has had enough. It was sometimes difficult to obtain detailed behavioral descriptions of children's rejecting behavior because "she didn't want it" was offered as final. On the other hand, parents were often concerned about preschool children's poor appetites and surprisingly reported that many of them did not like to eat rice.

Certain other events that are seen as sources of variation in the American research are experienced differently by Malay parents. Several items on the original questionnaire dealt with the presumably stressful experience of bathing. Our informants laughed at the idea that a child of any age would not enjoy a bath. Bathing several times a day is regarded as one of life's pleasures, a relief from the heat and humidity. Fastidiousness, identified as a temperamental trait by Graham Rutter & George (1973), would be rated as high for most of our group, as thresholds would be rated low. With very few exceptions infants are said to want to be cleaned up immediately if wet; preschoolers are reported to run to mother for a change of clothes if they get dirty while playing. Boys and girls are considered equally fastidious. Only a neglectful mother would fail to comply with the child's desire for cleanliness. Such powerful expectations seem to produce the desired results. Toilet training is accomplished between one and two years, perhaps expedited by the constant changes of clothing in infancy and by the fact that children sleep with their parents. It is described as a cognitive, verbal process: the child learns to <u>say</u> when he or she needs to be taken to the toilet. The expectation of low thresholds, especially for uncomfotable stimuli, is related to other child

rearing practices. Children are taught to be aware of their own sensations of heat, cold, dirt, pain, taste and odors. They are given frequent one-word comments and injunctions: "Hot! Break! Hurt! Bitter!" by parents and siblings. Some informants say it is unkind to tell a child to stop doing anything without giving a reason; the reasons are brief, emphatic and easily assimilated. They define a world in which the consequences of one's actions are anticipated. Subjectively, we see the results in the self-confidence of Malay children in middle childhood.

While play with toys is not considered very significant by Malay parents, play with other children is encouraged and even one-year-old babies are said to have friends. While individual differences in shyness or openness are noted, the ideal is to be friendly rather than shy. Parents relate this ideal to the need for social cooperation in later life.

Our respondents generally said that one cannot know much about a child's personality until the age of one or two years or older. Even though differences in behavior were described in infancy, they were not thought to be necessarily predictive of later personality. In addition there is a religiously based reluctance to predict the future. One indigenous characterization of temperament was described by some parents, though not all agreed. They said that it is fortunate for a child to resemble physically the parent of the opposite sex. A boy who looks like his mother and a girl who looks like her father will tend to have "cool" personalities, to be easygoing, while resembling the same sex parent makes one "hot", quick to anger and hardheaded. There are also health and dietary consequences of being hot or cool.

In conclusion, the Thomas and Chess conceptualization of temperament seems applicable to Malay childhood with some modifications. Malay parents are alert to early indications of individuality. The situations in which a child's individuality is most clearly expressed, however, are different in the Malay and American contexts. Judgements of the easiness or difficulty

of rearing a particular child must therefore be modified by awareness of each culture's expectations. Where expectations are strong for uniformity in an area of experience, they may modify individual tendencies and produce relative uniformity.

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Table 1

Temperamental Clusters

	Younger	Older	Total N	%
Easy	15	10	25	62%
Difficult	2	1	3	7.5%
Slow to warm-up	1	2	3	7.5%
Mixed	5	4	9	22.5%

Table 2

Scores on 9 Temperament Dimensions by Age Groups

ACTIVITY LEVEL	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
high	12	5	17
moderate/ varied	9	10	19
low	2	2	4

REGULARITY	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
regular	11	5	16
mixed/ mod	6	2	8
irregular	6	10	16

ADAPTABILITY	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
adapt-able	16	15	31
mixed	2	2	4
non adaptable	4	1	5
NSI*	1		1

THRESHOLDS	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
low	17	12	29
mixed	4	4	8
high	2	0	2
NSI		1	1

INTENSITY	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
low	5	2	7
mixed/ mod	7	9	16
high	11	6	17

MOOD	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
pos	79	12	31
mixed/ mod	4	3	7
neg	0	2	2

APPROACH	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
approach	13	7	20
mixed	4	5	9
withdraw	6	5	11

DISTRACTABILITY	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
distract-able	17	8	25
mixed	3	3	6
non distract-able	3	4	7
NSI		2	2

PERSISTENCE	<2 yr	>2 yr	Total
persistent	7	13	20
mixed	2	1	3
not persistent	6	3	9
NSI	8		8

*Not sufficient information

Banks - Malay Childhood Temperament and Individuality, SRCD 1981

Table 3

Percentage Scores on 9 Temperament Dimensions, Combined Age Groups

ACTIVITY LEVEL	%	REGULARITY		ADAPTABILITY	
high	42.5%	regular	40.0	adaptable	77.5
mod/ varied	47.5	mixed/ mod	20.0	mixed	10.
low	10	irregular	25.0	non-adaptable	12.5
				NSI*	2.5

THRESHOLDS		INTENSITY		MOOD	
low	72.5	low	17.5	positive	77.5
mixed/ mod	20.0	mixed/ mod	40.0	mixed/ mod	17.5
high	5.0	high	42.5	neg.	5.0
NSI	2.5				

APPROACH		DISTRACTABILITY		PERSISTENCE	
approach	52.5	distract-able	62.5	persistent	50.0
mixed/ mod	22.5	mixed/mod	15	mixed	7.5
withdrawal	27.5	not distract-able	17.5	not persistent	22.5
		NSI	5.0	NSI	20.0

*Not sufficient information